

POEMS IN THE FOLK MANNER

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Hallgerda, The Gold, Adapted from the Icelandic,
by Gladys Oaks — — — — —

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Hallgerda, the Gold

1.

HALLGERDA sits on the sunny floor
(Many men will come to grief)
Gold is the sun, gold is her hair,
Gold are her eyes of a thief.

Her uncle strides through her father's hall,
Hrut the Generous, Hrut the Wise,
"Who is this daughter of our race
With a thief in her golden eyes?"

A giant of a man in a giant of a hall,
A little girl windy and slim as a leaf. . .
"Hallgerda, Hallgerda, Hallgerda the Gold,
You have the eyes of a thief!"

2.

The girl grows tall in her golden hair
(Her hair waves gold, her body waves white)
And many suitors woo by day
To win the maid by night.

3.

Young Thorwald dwells on Middlefels Strand,
Old Oswif's son and only heir,
They own those islands plump and green
Which rise from the Firth of the Bear.

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"I am fevered, my Father," says Oswif's son,
"I would have Hallgerda the Gold for bride,
A woman like Iceland wild and fair,
Her father our kinsman in wealth and pride."

"There is too much anger in her hair,
There is too much fury in her eyes,
Her rage is too quick, her step is too bold,
To mate her a man must be cruel and wise!"

"But think how this furious woman could love!
Mine . . . trembling beside me. Are warriors afraid
Of women angry and beautiful?
Will Hallgerda, my wife, be Hallgerda, the maid?"

"She is cold as the rocks that lie under the stream,
She will warp the wood of your marriage bed.
I have said my thoughts. Now I help my son.
Tonight we will go to Hauskaldstede."

4.

Under the blue of the windless night
Where the blood-red sun hangs big and low
Like a wound in the still Icelandic sky
Oswif and his men ride over the snow.

Like drops of blood on a corpse's face
The light lies red on the cold, white ground,
And a cormorant with a fish in his beak
Swings through the air with a sougning sound.

At last they have come to Hauskald's house
Covered with brown and stony sod,
Just outside is the Hof of Thor
And they bow at the shrine of the household god.

A mighty welcome Hauskald gives
And his sturdy brother, Hrut the Wise,
So they tell how they have come to ask
For the girl with the gold in her eyes.

Old friends are these and nobles born,
The best of Iceland's warrior chiefs,
Big of bone and just of tongue,
Tameless in battle, fearless of griefs.

They stand in the big-beamed oaken hall,
A room as big-boned and sturdy as they,
And they name the dowers and swear the oaths
And drink hot mead to the wedding day.

5.

Hallgerda stalks through her father's hall—
(Thorwald, the son of Oswif . . . beware!)
Her eyes are full of an ominous fire
Under the lightning of her hair.

"Is it for this I have waited and planned?
To marry a Thorwald? What honor you do!
The fairest woman in all Iceland
And a stripling lad with an island or two!"

The girl met her father as flint meets steel
And the hard wills flashed till one of them broke,
The silence trembled with broken love—
Then her sob whined past him, and Hauskald spoke.

"Do you think your will shall outweigh my oath
When Hauskald's pride is as Hauskald's bread.
Rage if you want and weep if you please
But see that you make yourself fit to be wed!"

As a wind that shakes great ships like leaves
The surge of her fury shook her words,
"Remember my pride is the pride of your race
When you mate me off like a cow from your herds!"

6.

To Thiostolf, her godfather, Hallgerda goes
And tells him what has been said and done;
Then he kisses her flesh at the curving throat
Where tiny hairs glisten . . . his mouth to the sun.

"My Lovely, my Stormy, and why do you weep?
Time is swift to a warrior's bow;
You will live for a little under the Fell
And wherever you are Thiostolf shall go.

"You will marry once, you will marry twice,—
Thiostolf shall do what Thiostolf must,—
So obey what Hauskald, your father, says,
My knife and my beak do not gather much rust."

And he laughs a laugh that is strange for a man:
Leaves underfoot . . . and the crack of fire
In resinous wood . . . and the sob of a bone
When the axe gives an enemy his desire.

7.

The feasting was merry and many the guests
(Great horns of mead, flesh roasted with guile)
But she who sits on the throne of the bride
Smiles strangely, a glittering metal smile.

The air is sweet with the smell of mead
(The bride is beautiful there on the throne)
The foaming hydromels are emptied again
(They know that she smiles for herself alone.)

So Thorwald is married and all unasked
(Many men will come to grief)
A golden woman becomes a wife
Who smiles with the eyes of a thief.

8.

A giant that stands and glares at the sea,
Cutting the earth and the sky in two,
The frowning mountain of Middlefels Strand
Rises . . . a strange and troubled blue.

Between the mountain and the sea
Like a frozen bird on the frozen sands
Amid the glaciers and savage rocks
The lonely house of Oswif stands.

Hallgerda goes like a queen through the house,
A restless queen, an empty queen,
She calls for more—and more—and more—
But her moving eyes are haunted and lean.

Each night Hallgerda plans a feast,
Each night she wears a bright, new gown,
Each night she twists her fevered hair
Into a hot and golden crown.

It seems to Thorwald nights and days
Are thrown from out his wife's quick hands
As waves are broken into foam
Thrown by the winds on frozen sands.

The waves that sob along the beach
Are like the thoughts in Thorwald's brain
His young wife dances down the hall
With lovers in her train.

It seems to Thorwald that the guests
Who come each night to Oswifstede
Are silly, hungry colored sheep
Who graze inside his head.

The brave, bright grass that soon must die
Is like the thought in Thorwald's song
Between the teeth of greedy sheep . . .
The song is not too long.

9.

Young Thorwald sits in a dream and broods
Of the winter birds as they circle and fly,
Those dark and lonely and silent birds
That move like shadows across the sky.

Hallgerda comes to him, very gay,
She says, "I must have fish and grain
And wool to card and crimson dyes
Before night comes again."

Young Thorwald sits and stares at the Fell,
At the mists that are gathering thick and white,
Slowly down the mountain they roll,
Ghosts of giants in the thin, wan light.

"Three months ago," young Thorwald says,
"I gave you enough for a year." Must he speak
Always with pride to this woman he loves?
Will she never be tender . . . never be weak?

Hallgerda laughs. Not heavily. Sharp.
A laugh like a whip, and her voice is high,
"You may starve yourself rich,—a family trait,—
The son of Oswif may scrimp . . . but not I!"

Her laugh is a whip that cuts his thoughts,
Cuts the mists of the Fell from his eye;
Her words are a beak that hacks his dreams,
Kills the birds that circle and fly.

His wife—not his love but an enemy—
Bitter her beauty, hateful her grace;
His raised arm falls like a thunder-split tree;
She sways on her legs; there is blood on her face.

Then the silence comes back and the rolling mists
And the shadowy hosts that are birds in the sky,
And it seems to Thorwald that he dreams
And in the dream he knows he must die.

Still the thing of a dream, he calls his men
And they run with the skiff and they row away
From the Giants of the Fell, down the Firth of the Bear,
And he smiles at the sun in his dream of a day.

10.

Thiostolf comes to show his new axe,
Good wood beneath, good iron above,
It shines like a moon from the toil of his hands,—
A lesser love for a greater love.

Scratching a rune on a horse's skull
Hallgerda sits on the beach alone,
And Thiostolf sees the wound in her cheek
And the grace of the hand that writes with a stone.

A strange, deep sight on the icy beach,
This woman so tall, so envied, so fair,
Digging a curse into bones long dead . . .
The horse's old skull, the strong gold of her hair.

"Who gave you that wound?" Thiostolf says,
"That big, dead thing there makes me creep.
See the axe I bring, smooth and fair as your breast,
Who shall feel its kiss before I sleep?"

She thrusts her arm through an empty eye
And turns so his nostrils taste her breath;
She sits the skull so he reads the curse,
"Who has married Hallgerda shall marry death."

11.

Pictures come riding out of the sea,—
Her fancy is sick, her brain hurt and strayed,
For all of the things that the water can be
Hallgerda hears it as blade on blade.

She has kissed Thiostolf as Hallgerda can.
(A dirge, she has learned, may be sung by a kiss)
A creature with breasts cannot fight like a man,—
Her breasts are her weapons, grown lovely for this.

But she longs for the iron alive in her hand,
Not with lips but to feel the axe kissing the bone.
O the scorn of a man with a hand that slaps
The life from a body you thought was your own.

Her hands stiff beside her, her battle with tears,
Her flesh dry as earth that is soaked with the sun,
She thought she would crumble, struck dead with the force
Of a helplessness, beaten before she'd begun.

And it's fair for a woman to fight as she may
Since she is not a man. But a skiff stained red
Has sailed down the Firth; and Thiostolf smiles
A smile like a mirror. Young Thorwald is dead.

12.

Old Oswif will not be pleasant to meet,
So Hallgerda packs her gowns blue and red
And turns up her hair round the scarlet belt
At her waist, and rides to Haushaldstede.

With each man of the household she leaves a gift,
And though, each to the other, they hasten to say,
"Who marries Hallgerda marries death,"
They grieve for the nights she has taken away.

13.

Young Thorwald is dead. An axe split his back
While he dreamed. But old Oswif has no time for sorrow,
For Thiostolf has fled through the forest to Swan,
A magician, the master of death and tomorrow.

The woods are a garden before his house,
He fills them with ghosts like the thoughts of the blind;
Who walks in the forest sees what he dreads . . .
What he wishes . . . the thoughts that walk in his mind.

Hallgerda has sent Thiostolf to Swan
(She bewitches magicians like common men.)
Thiostolf has served; she has paid him well;
But the hand with the axe may be useful again.

14.

Old Oswif has gathered all his men
To ride through the silent winter night;
The forest shimmers with wavering mist,
Over clothes and their faces it shakes its light.

A light like a gaze, like a gaze in the wind,
A light that looks, then shudders by,
A light that will not let you see,
Till the night is a giant and the giant is an eye.

They ride into the forest of mist
Where the trees are like swollen blackish veins
And the darkness crawls through a tunnel of flesh
And the shadow that walks by you whispers and strains.

The men cannot shout, have forgotten to sing,
The horses move but their hoofs make no sound.
Einar the White sees a woman's hand
Strange for this bloody wood to have found.

Like Hallgerda's fingers the mist fingers move
And Einar rides for their warmth in his hair,
Like a daisy pulled, a *baldersbrow*,
His limbs from his body, they find him there.

White are the breasts in a bloody wood
And mist may be stars to streak a breast—
They are big Hallgerda's, Stengrinur broods,
And lips may stray where a head is pressed.

In the bloody wood they find him dead.
There is dew on his mouth. And stiffly he lies
As if poison had ravished the life from his flesh
When a glory of passion was still in his eyes.

Gunnar the Tall sees the curve of a hip
Where it turns to a thigh. And the skin is white
As Hallgerda's skin, and he longs for her feel
Against his flanks in the icy night.

And it's strange to see a dead man stand
Gravely clutching the shadow-filled air
With the look on his face that men have when they love
As if he had wooed the lightning there.

15.

Above them the sky is a closing hand
Dripping torrents of cold, white mist,
And the trees as they ooze a thick, dark blood
Seem to sicken and twist.

And each man that touches the sky's thin drip
Dies a strange and staring death,
And each man that is caught by the dying trees
Lies scorched in the smoke of his breath.

Then the horses turn in the bloody wood
And silently rush from the silent place,
And in that fury without a sound
Each man as he rides sees Hallgerda's face.

16.

Like a roll of newly woven cloth
 So precious that a maiden is shy
 Then suddenly flings in a dazzling length
 The northern lights shake loose in the sky.

Sometimes as thick as a warrior's fist,
 Sometimes as smooth as a woman's skin,
 Sometimes the print of a fingertip
 Of Baldur . . . paling . . . shimmering thin.

Yellow and purple and glimmering green
 Drifts of lightning soft as snow.
 As thoughts unfold beneath the blood
 The colors change, the colors grow.

The haunted comrades of Oswif ride
 Beneath the lights, but their eyes are sick,
 They cannot see for visions of ghosts
 But that hoofs are true and that paths are quick.

And Oswif remembers another night
 When he rode with his men to Hauskaldstede
 And the sun was a wound in the sky's dark side
 And a cormorant swung high overhead.

17.

Hauskald welcomes them loud and well
 With lights and mead and hearty cheer,
 And Oswif speaks for the worth of his son
 And the bloody wood does not seem so near.

Then Hauskald says, "I did not kill
 Your son, nor plot that he should die!"
 But Hrut says, "Brother—you know it well—
 Nose is next of kin to eye."

Then Hauskald says, "Will you name the award?"
And Hrut says, "Yes; And a judgment brief,
For in a pair of golden eyes
A murderer now companions a thief."

Then Oswif says he is satisfied
For he knows that all will be fairly done,
And Hrut says, "Two hundred silver coins,
Two hundred silver coins for a son!"

—*Gladys Oaks.*

The Barren Mad Woman

"I'LL make your clothes of fine white thread
As soft and tender as your skin.
Fine yellow cakes shall be your bread.
Enter my house, oh, enter in!

Your name I'll not tell anyone.
The color of your eyes and hair
Shall not be known beneath the sun . . .
No one shall know you anywhere.

But with bright, hard and hungry heart
I weave your fine thread gown for use . . .
Come, come. I shall not move or start.
Destroy me, if you choose!"

—*Marya Zaturensky.*

Wide River

MA baby lives across de river
An' I ain't got no boat.
She lives across de river,
I ain't got no boat.
I ain't a good swimmer
An' I don't know how to float.

Wide, wide river
'Tween ma love an' me.
Wide, wide river
'Tween ma love an' me.
I never knowed how
Wide a river can be.

Got to cross that river
An' git to ma baby somehow.
Cross that river,
Git to ma baby somehow,
Cause if I don't see ma baby
I'll lay down an' die right now.

—*Langston Hughes*

Homesick Blues

DE railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
Ever time de trains pass
I wants to go somewhere.

I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth.
Went down to de station.
Heart was in ma mouth.
Lookin' for a box car
To roll me to de South.

Homesick blues, Lord,
'S a terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth an' laughs.

—*Langston Hughes.*

Judgement Day

THEY put ma body in de ground,
Ma soul went flyin' o' de town.

Lord Jesus!

Went flyin' to de stars an' moon
A shoutin' God, I's comin' soon.

O Jesus!

Lord in heaben,
Crown on his head,
Says don't be 'fraid
Cause you ain't dead.

Sweet Jesus!

An' standin' at de Judgment Seat
Ma sins is dirt at Jesus feet.

Ma Jesus!

Now I'm settin' clean an' bright
In de sweet o' ma Lord's sight,—
Clean an' bright,
Clean an' bright.

—*Langston Hughes.*

Pima Death Song

PITY me and I will pity you.
Because of my sadness
This world is covered with feathers,
Because of my brother's death
The mountains are covered with soft feathers.
The sun comes over them
But it gives me no light,
Night comes over them
And has no darkness for my rest.
Pity me, pity me—
And I will pity you!
When I thought I was holding all sadness
There was yet a stronger sadness,
For my brother came and stood upon my breast,
His tears fell down on my body.
I tried to hug him
And hugged only myself!
Pity me!
From the shadows of trees
I have learned it could be done,
From the lift of these hills
I have learned it could be done:
Now I will gird on my bowels for belt,
Make sandels of my scalp,
I will fill my skull with blood
And talk like a drunkard—
Out of my own bones
I will make a great fire.
It shall light me to the Land of Death!

Adapted from a text in *Indian Nights*: Lloyd.

—Eda Lou Walton.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

GLADYS OAKS has recently completed a novel. A volume of poetry is soon to be published. She is the author of *Chinese White*. This installment represents a third of the complete poem whose plot material was taken from the *Icelandic Njala* or *Njal's Saga*.

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MARYA ZATURENSKY is well known to readers of poetry. She was born in Kiev, Russia, and came to this country at the age of nine.

EDA LOU WALTON is the author of *Dawn Boy*, a book of notable adaptations from the songs of the Indian of the Southwest.

The August Number of the *Measure* will be devoted to the publication of a single long poem. Manuscripts must be sent to the Editor by July 10th, and must not be more than five hundred and thirty lines long.

The Measure

A Journal of Poetry

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